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# Bleeding Women in Sacred Spaces: Negotiating Theological Belonging in the 'Pathway' to Priesthood

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[journals.sagepub.com/home/ftt](https://journals.sagepub.com/home/ftt)**Eve Parker**

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## Abstract

This article focuses on the theological journeying of women ordinands in the Church of England, who have had to negotiate their belonging in the 'pathway' to Priesthood in ordination training. Attention is given to the extent to which the personhood of women is enabled to truly flourish in a theological education system that is dominated by men and predominantly patriarchal and Western theologising. It suggests that a gendered politics of belonging has been used and maintained through the socio-religious construct of 'shame' in order to maintain the boundaries of belonging within the formation process, and therefore calls for an en-gendered 'pathway to the priesthood'. This is exemplified in a re-reading of the bleeding woman who dares to challenge the hegemonies of patriarchy and purity by touching the cloak of Christ in Luke 8:40-48. This research is part of an ongoing project with Common Awards at Durham University that explores barriers to belonging in theological education for those in training for ordination. It has therefore received ethical approval for interviews and participant observations.

## Keywords

Belonging, priesthood, theological, education, shame, feminist

## Introduction

The notion of a woman 'knowing one's place' is something that women have had to negotiate and navigate throughout history, particularly in the history of the Church – after the likes of Paul as quoted in 1 Timothy 2.11-14 states, 'let a woman learn in silence with all submissiveness. I permit no woman to teach or to have authority over men; she

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is to keep silent'. It is only in the last seven years that all orders of the Church of England have been open to women, and this has not been an easy process, it has been a time of much hurt, contestation and debate. As Emma Percy remarks, following the vote to permit the ordination of women into the Priesthood, 'Bishops told the women not to rejoice too much, not to appear triumphant and to be conscious of the pain they were causing to others . . . many women, well socialized into this behaviour, duly conformed'.<sup>1</sup> It has also become part of the formation process for ordinands to assent to the five guiding principles, that state that 'on the grounds of theological conviction' some within the Church of England, 'are unable to receive the ministry of women bishops or priests' and that the Church of England, 'remains committed to enabling them to flourish within its life and structures'.<sup>2</sup> The Church has promoted the concept of 'mutual flourishing', which as Percy notes, 'has become a catchword for not asking the difficult questions but finding pragmatic ways of working, despite different views on the place of women'.<sup>3</sup> Consequently, women ordinands and clergy remain in an ambiguous position, with issues of inequality risk becoming further ingrained and embodied, as prejudicial views and patriarchal theologies are often able to go unchallenged theologically.

This article relies on ethnographic research, including classroom observation, structured interviews and informal conversations in order to gain a greater understanding of the experiences of women ordinands in the United Kingdom. Ethical approval for this research was granted from Durham University, and interviews took place with informed consent following strict guidelines. As with all theological research that includes exploring the lived experiences of others, it is important to situate myself in the process, because, as Gerardo Marti has commented, 'insights generated by participant observation are constantly at risk of imposition of personal presumptions and asserted "truths," especially when researchers enter the field with strongly held convictions and compelling worldviews'.<sup>4</sup> My identity as an Anglican feminist lay person involved in the training of ordinands and theological education no doubt impacted my observations as it was in response to witnessing the inadequacy of the theological education to take seriously the lived experiences of women; Black and minority ethnic students; lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer and intersex (LGBTI); and working-class students and ordinands that I began this research. I have, however, sought not to impose my own personal 'worldviews' in this theological discourse, but rather to rely on qualitative research, inclusive of participant observation, structured and unstructured interviews and conversations. An intersectional feminist theologising has enabled a methodological response to the bodily experiences of those in theological education who have experienced feelings of unbelonging, shame and marginalisation as a result of their gender, class,

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1. Percy E (2017) Women, ordination and the Church of England: an ambiguous welcome. *Feminist Theology* 26(1): 90–100, 92.
  2. The five guiding principles: guidance for candidates for ordination in the Church of England. Available at: [https://www.churchofengland.org/sites/default/files/2017-10/the\\_five\\_guiding\\_principles.pdf](https://www.churchofengland.org/sites/default/files/2017-10/the_five_guiding_principles.pdf) (accessed 13 January 2020).
  3. Percy (2017) Women, ordination and the Church of England, 90–100, 97.
  4. See Marti G (2016) Found theologies versus imposed theologies: remarks on theology and ethnography from a sociological perspective. *Ecclesial Practices* 3: 157–172, 157.

ethnicity and sexuality, as it challenges dominant models of theological discourse that have privileged certain bodies over others.

Focus is given to theological education in formation, as the role of theological education is vital when developing the skills and insights required to contemplate God, self and 'other'. Such contemplations demand an identity-specific honesty, one that is born out of the experiences of the body – and as our bodies as women are often silenced, mocked, marginalised, abused, patronised and violated, it requires bringing these experiences to our contemplations on God and Scripture, in order to undress and expose the multiple patriarchal and misogynistic belief systems that have permitted and justified such actions against the bodies of women, and taught women to 'know our place' and 'stay silent'. In doing so, theological education can employ pedagogies that enable the experiences of women to become 'a major resource for the hermeneutical process of doing theology and reading the Bible'.<sup>5</sup> There is a sense of urgency about such pedagogical processes, as it is only in the past 26 years that we have seen an increase in the number of women studying theology – particularly in relation to formational training for ministry. As Elizabeth Schussler Fiorenza remarks, 'consequently women . . . still have to adopt the language and discourse of those clerical and academic communities that have silenced us . . . marginalised us and relegated us to the status of social, religious, and intellectual nonpersons'.<sup>6</sup> It is for this reason that when it comes to considering barriers of 'belonging' in the Priesthood for women, it is important to locate the bodies of women in the 'pathway' to the priesthood, that includes the formational journeying through theological education – as education holds the potential either to re-enforce oppressive theologies and beliefs or liberate and celebrate the bodies of women in sacred spaces. As it is especially during this time that people contemplate the self, while discerning who they are before God.

Therefore, questions need to be asked as to whether Theological Education Institutes have enabled women to become 'speaking theological subjects' and to what extent the lives of women and all other marginalised peoples have been enabled to truly flourish. Because, as one ordinand who shall remain anonymous noted,

I am a working class woman who has given up so much to be here and follow my calling to serve Jesus, but I constantly feel like I don't fit in. I can't relate to the books I read, I feel uncomfortable speaking out when I don't agree, I don't want to say when I can't make it to something because I have to look after my family member – because this just makes me look weak, and every doubt that the BAP had in me will be shown to be true.<sup>7</sup>

Women students are often forced to internalise their differences or individual needs as personal failures. This requires further exploration of the politics of religious belonging

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5. Tamez E (1998) Women's lives as sacred text. In: Pui-Lan K and Fiorenza ES (eds) *Women's Sacred Scriptures*. London: Orbis Books, 57–65.

6. Fiorenza ES (1992) *But She Said: Feminist Practices of Biblical Interpretation*. Boston, MA: Beacon Press, 171.

7. Interviews were conducted with women ordinands training at Theological Education Institutes across the United Kingdom; all ordinands remain anonymous. Women Ordinand Interview 3, interview by author, Manchester, January 2020.

particularly in relation to the formation process to the priesthood. As belonging within a religion means belonging to a social group, shaped by kinship, faith and identity, 'it is not based solely on belief or religious conviction; rather it is grounded in the social culture'<sup>8</sup>; the boundaries of which are controlled by social and religious dogmatics that can enforce fixed notions of belonging, if the boundaries are transgressed, that can lead to feelings of isolation, guilt and shame on behalf of the 'transgressor'. Particularly if religion is to be understood as 'conformity',<sup>9</sup> then those who do not conform to imposed norms can be considered a threat – and conformity is often challenged on the grounds of gender, ethnicity and sexuality. It is for this reason that it is often women, LGBTQI and ethnic minorities within religious groups that remain silent in their feelings of non-belonging in order to be accepted. Those in positions of power within faith communities often adapt to religiously and socially constructed norms, and this comes at the expense of those on the margins of their faith communities. This is particularly the case in the formation process where ideal notions of priesthood are presented, and a 'sacramental shame dynamic grows out of and serves to protect theologies that ground recognition of personhood in a particular binary understanding of gender and sexuality'.<sup>10</sup> Theological education, though, holds the potential to challenge such binaries, if it can be transformed in order to enable those who have been excluded and marginalised to 'become speaking subjects and agents for systemic change'.<sup>11</sup> This, as shall be discussed, requires an engendering process where the experiences of women and other marginalised voices become the starting point for addressing notions of unbelonging in the pathway to priesthood, in order to challenge imposed norms that prevent ordinands and clergy from being true to their identities within their faith communities.

## Shame and the Politics of Religious Belonging in the 'Pathway to the Priesthood'

The ways in which religious beliefs are lived out by individuals or groups are to a large degree determined by the extent to which the individual feels as though they *belong* in the religious group. Therefore, lived religious belonging is complex, as it forces us to consider the multiple experiences of the individual *believer* in their quest to achieve a 'feeling of being at home'.<sup>12</sup> The politics of religious belonging is determined by multiple

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8. See Doja A (2000) The politics of religion in the reconstruction of identities: the Albanian situation. *Critique of Anthropology* 20(4): 421–438, 422.

9. Doja A (2000) The politics of religion in the reconstruction of identities.

10. Moon D and Tobin TW (2018) Sunsets and solidarity: overcoming sacramental shame in conservative Christian churches to forge a queer vision of love and justice. *Hypatia* 33(3): 451–468, 453.

11. See Olusola AI (2013) Exploring the relevance of feminist leadership in theological education of Nigeria. *Khazar Journal of Humanities and Social Sciences* 16(4): 26–40, 30.

12. The complexity of notions of political belonging is also related to a need to intimately belong; this can be described as emotive belonging in order to achieve a 'sense of self', see Youkhana E (2015) A conceptual shift in studies of belonging and the politics of belonging. *Social Inclusion* 3(4): 10–24, 12.

boundaries, as each believer is affected by their social, economic and political location. The boundaries are what controls one's authenticity in a fixed notion of belonging, and as Yuval-Davis remarks, the politics of belonging involves 'the dirty work of boundary maintenance'<sup>13</sup>; such boundaries she notes, 'sometimes physically, but always symbolically, separate the world population into "us" and "them"''.<sup>14</sup> This is visible in the colonial imagery where the indigenous subjects are degraded and subjugated, and in situations of religious oppression where the boundaries of class, gender, caste, ethnicity and nationality are used as a means of imposing a hierarchy of *believers*. The physical and symbolic boundaries of belonging in the politics of religion can be constructed in a way that present women as the 'thems', the 'others' and the 'unbelongers'. Such boundaries strengthen and enable unequal social relations and therefore access to power. Shame is used as a mechanism by which such boundaries of religious belonging can be maintained, and as Sally Nash highlights, shame in the context of Christianity, can be 'personal, relational, communal, structural, theological and historical'.<sup>15</sup> Shame is an embodied reality that is further impacted by one's socio-political and economic status. The politics of religious belonging within the formation process to the Priesthood must therefore be explored through an intersectional lens, noting that 'we cannot homogenise the ways any political project or claimings affect people who are differentially located within the same boundaries of belonging'.<sup>16</sup> As such, ethnographic research has proved vital in situating the context for addressing issues of unbelonging in the theological education formation process.

Personal reflections of ordinands in training within the Church of England highlight the extent to which the personhood and identity of the individual is brought under scrutiny. As well as the role that shame plays in informing one's sense of belonging in the pathway to the priesthood throughout the discernment and formation process – noting that 'priesthood is not only about what a person does. It is also what a person is'.<sup>17</sup> One ordinand's narrative captures the extent to which power is abused within the structures and processes of the church:

Prior to going to BAP they asked me why I got divorced, I explained that we were married at 18, that he was violent with me and that I could no longer take the abuse and so I had to leave. They didn't take my word for it though, they had to interview members of my family and his to make sure I was telling the truth. I felt humiliated, I had to re-live the abuse over again, it was 35 years ago that this happened and it was like another blow to my face. My confidence was shattered and so I decided to not carry on the process. I went back the following year because I still felt God's calling. Now in training I still feel ashamed of my past, even though I wasn't responsible for it.<sup>18</sup>

13. Yuval-Davis N (2006) Belonging and the politics of the belonging. *Patterns of Prejudice* 40(3): 197–214, 204.

14. Yuval-Davis N (2006) Belonging and the politics of the belonging, 197–214, 3.

15. Nash S (2017) On researching shame in the church. *Practical Theology* 10(4): 396–406, 399.

16. Yuval-Davis N (2006) Belonging and the politics of the belonging, 197–214, 7.

17. The Diocese of Salisbury (n.d.) Your role . . . Ordained Ministry. Available at: <https://www.salisbury.anglican.org/ministry/vocations/your-role...-ordained-ministry> (accessed 19 January 2020).

18. Woman Ordinand 6, interview by author, February 2020.

The ordinand's reference to feeling 'ashamed' has implications to her 'feeling at home' or rather feeling a sense of belonging within her training for ordination, as shame directly impacts the body politics of the individual. Her experience also highlights the extent to which the power structures of the Church, in this case the Bishops' Advisory Panel (BAP), misused and abused their position of power, forcing her to relive her suffering in order to 'prove' herself worthy before them. The relationship between gender, power and shame is embodied in the lived experiences of the ordinand, as the politics of shame, particularly when applied to notions of Christian belonging is complex. We see this in the lived experiences of ordinands, where their gender, sexuality and ethnicity has implications for their belonging in a community, and the extent to which the power dynamics of those involved in the discernment process can impact one's sense of belonging. Moon and Tobin remark on how 'shame, dispensed unevenly and unjustly amid social hierarchies, often becomes an instrument of oppression, sometimes becoming instilled as a disposition in members of stigmatized social groups'.<sup>19</sup> Such 'shame' was dispensed through the discernment process to interrogate the ordinand's history of a violent relationship, domestic violence, abuse and divorce. Whether it was done subconsciously or consciously, the power dynamics isolated and shamed the ordinand, as the social and religious hierarchy brought about a feeling of unbelonging. The complexity of shame in the politics of religious belonging involves addressing the emotions attached to the personhood of the individual, and ultimately their fears of being unworthy, defective and deserving of rejection, as 'shame indicates both a desire to hide or withdraw and a yearning for recognition and belonging'.<sup>20</sup>

For example, an ordinand who is a single mum narrated a constant sense of feeling judged by others within her residential training institute, her placement church and the wider church. She stated that, while it was never explicit, people would often make subtle comments about the importance of marriage, and one of her tutors had offered to pray for her, that she might find herself a husband so that her children had the necessary role models.<sup>21</sup> It is examples of such pedagogical practice and structural patriarchy that led Sally Nash to argue for 'shame' to be on the curriculum for theological education, as she notes, 'ministerial education was unlike anything I had experienced before because of the power of others to write not just about what you can do, but also, more significantly, about who you are as a potential priest'.<sup>22</sup> Students often do not feel as though they can speak out, even when they experience prejudicial behaviour, for fear of being reported as a 'bad (potential) priest', and as a consequence being thrown off the course (for which they might well have given up jobs), losing financial support, being marked as a failure – all in a context where there is no effective opportunity to appeal.

While there has been a clear desire and commitment within the Church of England to become more inclusive in regards to those who are put forward for ordination, the fact remains that both the discernment process and the theological educational 'pathway' to the Priesthood for the most part remain embedded within patriarchal structures. Those

19. Moon D and Tobin TW (2018) *Sunsets and solidarity*, 451–468, 452.

20. Moon D and Tobin TW (2018) *Sunsets and solidarity*, 451–468, 455.

21. Woman Interview 1, interview by author, February 2020.

22. Nash S (2017) *On researching shame in the church*, 396–406, 401.



who were previously not welcome are now entering territories that were not designed for them. Spaces where traditional, heteronormative, patriarchal theologies that have been used as a means of historically creating cultures of unbelonging for women, LGBTQI people and people of colour remain the norm for moulding priests in the formation process. As a result, theological education remains to a large degree responsible for the boundary maintenance of those in training, at the potential expense of an ordinand's freedom to transgress so that they are free to contemplate themselves in their fullness before God. Consequently, women in the Church of England might be welcome in the Priesthood, 'but the welcome can still feel provisional and it comes with an expectation of gracious tolerance towards those who strongly believe that they should not be there'.<sup>23</sup> For Percy, the Church 'has chosen pragmatic solutions rather than theological ones in the desire to keep a broad Church',<sup>24</sup> and this has come at the expense of personal notions of belonging for those in training for ordination.

A student who was openly gay, for example, expressed a fear of going on a placement at a church that explicitly preached against same sex relationships, but he was told that such a placement was vital if he was to experience the diversity of the church. The psychological implications of this decision were not addressed, and this relates directly to what Moon and Tobin refer to as a form of toxic 'sacramental shame', that they argue is brought about by a religious community that 'unjustly stigmatizes and shames a group of people', creating a feeling of unworthiness and inequality for the stigmatised individual. The sacramental nature of the shame

complicates this dynamic by both posing as love and locating the shame in the shamed person's own constant failures of will. It makes being recognized as a person – in the eyes of God and others – contingent on constant displays of will to change things most LGBTI people cannot change, instilling shame as an enduring, conscious mental state.<sup>25</sup>

The ordinand expressed a feeling of 'fear' at the notion of going to a place of worship where he would feel 'despised' and 'dirty'. Such embodied emotions in the formation process are dangerous for the mental health of the ordinand if left ignored, as the individual is left feeling guilty for their very being, and shamed from their cohort and community. The sacramental nature of the shame can risk leaving people feeling isolated from God. While such experiences enable an ordinand to have an insight into the breadth of the Church of England, if the theologies that underscore certain stances, for example, on homosexuality, are not undressed as part of the same training process, for example, by applying a queer theological analysis to the placement itself, then this denies flourishing on the part of the gay ordinand, and shame can become 'instilled as a embodied disposition'.<sup>26</sup>

But shame is itself multifaceted, as 'feeling shame also indicates a desire to belong, confirms love, and provides the potential to reconstitute the self against systems of

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23. Percy E (2017) Women, ordination and the Church of England, 90–100, 100.

24. Percy E (2017) Women, ordination and the Church of England, 90–100, 98.

25. Moon D and Tobin TW (2018) Sunsets and solidarity.

26. Moon D and Tobin TW (2018) Sunsets and solidarity, 451–468, 457.



oppression that partially constitute us'.<sup>27</sup> Seeing shame as a mechanism of resistance is also embedded within liberative motifs of Christianity, as I shall come to discuss. This is particularly important when we come to exploring the liberative potential of theological education in the formation process that could instead offer critical theological dialoguing that enables true flourishing for both 'belongers' and 'unbelongers'. In agreement with Emma Percy, there exists an underlying failure to think theologically about gender that has resulted in continued and profound inequalities in the Church's treatment of women in leadership. The failure to think theologically and critically about the role of women and sexuality creates false impressions of idealised unity within the Church, which comes at the expense not only of women and LGBTQI people but also of those who oppose the ordination of women and believe homosexuality to be sinful. If theological education does not allow the space to transgress imposed norms, and think critically about dogmatic beliefs, then it simply accommodates patriarchal privileges and maintains fixed boundaries, while polarising individuals – leaving feelings of unbelonging, isolation and sacramental shame to go unchallenged.

## Engendering Theological Education

Education is central to formation, as education 'is one of the mechanisms by which social structures are reproduced . . .'. The sociologist of education Freire makes the point that education enables for 'the transference of power and privileges . . .'.<sup>28</sup> By applying such theory to the theological education institutes, we can witness how social structures such as classism, racism, patriarchy and sexism are reproduced. We see this in the curriculum, the reading lists, the staff representation and the methodologies of teaching. When we are taught Christian thought and Christian theology, it is dominated first by the Church fathers – Augustine, Origen, Anselm, Aquinas, Luther, Calvin – and then we move on to Moltmann, Niebuhr, Rahner, Gadamer. This is what has become known as 'real' theology. To quote the liberation theologian, Gustavo Gutierrez, 'the history of Christianity has . . . been written by white, western, bourgeois hands',<sup>29</sup> and the same can be said for the vast majority of our theological curriculums and dominant theologies that shape the academic formation process into the Priesthood, as 'what is said in Manila is relevant for the Philippines. But what is said in . . . Oxford or Yale is relevant for the entire church'.<sup>30</sup> This is about an unjust distribution of power in theological education.

27. Moon D and Tobin TW (2018) *Sunsets and solidarity*.

28. See Michel-Schertges D (2015) Free choice of education? Capabilities, possibility spaces, and incapacities of education, labor, and the way of living one values. In: Atzmüller R and Otto HU (eds) *Facing Trajectories from School to Work: Towards a Capability-Friendly Youth Policy in Europe*. Cham: Springer, 73–87, 77.

29. Gutierrez G (1978) Two theological perspectives: liberation theology and progressive theology. In: Torres S and Fabella V (eds) *The Emergent Gospel: Theology from the Underside of History*. Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 240–251, 248.

30. Gonzalez JL (1990) *Manana, Christian Theology from a Hispanic Perspective*. Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 52.

It is for this reason that theological colleges around the world are doing theology differently, as the Hispanic theologian, Ada Maria Isasi-Diaz describes, 'to do theology is to free theology from the exclusive hold of academia; it is also a matter of denouncing the false dichotomy between thought and action so prevalent in Western culture'.<sup>31</sup> This is why when we explore issues of belonging in theological education in the 'pathway' to ordination – we have to consider the narratives that have been excluded. As the African theologian Musa Dube puts it,

post-colonial and feminists subjects are confronted with the struggle against reading canons they did not write or select; against literary images that derogate their humanity and legitimize their oppression; and against institutions such as the school, the church and the government that they do not control, which exclude their texts and impose the texts that baptise their oppression.<sup>32</sup>

There is a need therefore for a pedagogy that is more inclusive, that recognises that learning and knowledge takes 'place in the context of people's lives and that people experience life differently'<sup>33</sup>; while also acknowledging that the theological education in the West remains dominated by White male scholarship that as Justo Gonzalez describes, 'is taken to be normative, universal theology, to which then women, other minorities . . . may add their footnotes'.<sup>34</sup> If theological education in the formation process is to deconstruct imposed norms and move beyond boundaries that seek to prevent us from realising ourselves more fully in our contemplations on God, it must therefore be open to new possibilities.

In agreement with bell hooks:

The classroom with all its limitations remains a location of possibility. In that field of possibility we have the opportunity to labour for freedom, to demand of ourselves and our comrades an openness of mind and heart that allows us to face reality even as we collectively imagine ways to move beyond boundaries, to transgress. This is education as the practice of freedom.<sup>35</sup>

For women and students from minority backgrounds who have been held captive by male, Western, heteronormative, epistemological scholarship, there is an opportunity for new and exciting ways of doing and living theology, as more diverse groups of people enter theological education institutes. According to Lester Edwin Ruiz, theological education institutions in many way 're-present society'. As such, it is 'more necessary than ever' to re-think the role of theological education,

31. Isasi-Diaz AM and Tarango Y (1988) *Hispanic Women: Prophetic Voice in the Church*. San Francisco, CA: Harper & Row, 2.

32. Shomanah MWD (1998) Scripture, feminism and postcolonial contexts. In: Pui-Lan K and Fiorenza ES (eds) *Women's Sacred Scriptures*. London: SCM Press, 45–55, 49.

33. Siejk C (2011) New responses to enduring questions in religious and theological education. *Religious Education* 106(2): 198–214, 202.

34. Gonzalez JL (1990) *Manana, Christian Theology from a Hispanic Perspective*.

35. hooks b (1989) *Talking Back: Thinking Feminist, Thinking Black*. Boston, MA: South End Press, 207.

‘because they are already implicated in society as sites for practices that shape human experience – for thinking, feeling, and indeed, acting – and, as sites of contestation, of contending perspectives, commitments, values, about the good, the true, and the beautiful which are necessary in the articulation of theological curricula adequate to the needs of the 21<sup>st</sup> century’.<sup>36</sup>

If it is the task of theological education ‘to motivate, equip and enable the people of God to develop their gifts’,<sup>37</sup> then we need to be asking the question of how this is to be done?

One of the ways in which women can better negotiate their theological belonging in the pathway to ordination is through the ‘engendering’ of theological education. Engendering is not simply discussing gender studies, or adding ‘feminist, womanist, mujerista or other women’s theologies of liberation’ to the curriculum. It involves systematic analysis of the way in which women exist in a particular context, structure and institute and demands an acknowledgement of classism, racism and sexism: ‘engendering theological education flows from a recognition of these imbalances and seeks ways to transform them’.<sup>38</sup> Ellen Blue, for example, in her article, ‘Should theological education be different for clergy women?’ addresses the fact that theological education is leaving women, in particular, ‘unprepared to deal with resistance to their presence in ministry’.<sup>39</sup> This is further supported by Ministry Division’s recent report into clergy wellbeing in the Church of England, where it was revealed that women clergy struggled with ‘mental stress, isolation and guilt’, and as one woman noted in the report,

‘mentally, yeah, I don’t know, I’m tired. And it’s tiring having to balance all those different expectations and wear all those different hats, and sometimes I feel like I don’t wear any hats particularly well, so, you know, church leader, ordinand, mother, wife – it’s hard’.<sup>40</sup>

In response to such lived realities of women clergy, Blue developed an engendered curriculum, that included modules that were specifically for clergy women in training, although open to all, in order ‘to help women form their identity as women ministers’. She brought in ordained guest speakers, who had worked in numerous church contexts, and ‘each began by recounting some of her journey in ministry’. The practice of storytelling is important in a feminist pedagogy as personal narratives in education ‘give

36. Ruiz LEJ (2010) The theological curriculum in accredited graduate theological education: a commentary on a North American conversation. In: Werner D, Esterline D and Kang N (eds) *Handbook of Theological Education in World Christianity*. Oxford: Regnum, 271–285, 278.

37. Olusola AI (2013) Exploring the relevance of feminist leadership in theological education of Nigeria.

38. Naidoo M (2015) *Contested Issues in Training Ministers in South Africa*. Stellenbosch, South Africa: Sun Media, 60.

39. Blue E (2012) Should theological education be different for clergywomen? Doing ‘women’s work a mainline protestant seminary.’ In: Jones I, Wootton J and Thorpe K (eds) *Women and Ordination in the Christian Churches: International Perspectives*. London: T&T Clark, 66–69.

40. Quoted in Becket A (2018) Change is worse than a rest, say stressed clergy. *Church Times*, 18 October. Available at: <https://www.churchtimes.co.uk/articles/2018/19-october/news/uk/change-is-worse-than-a-rest-say-stressed-clergy> (accessed 13 December 2019).

context, provide examples and public stories, and their use in education'.<sup>41</sup> Blue taught her class the importance of a hermeneutics of suspicion, she offered space for student-led content, she used pastoral resources developed by other women and highlighted that women's ministry is different as a result of their gender and centuries of patriarchal subjugation. Katherine Paisley highlights this reality when sharing her experiences in her first parish, stating, 'my very existence was confrontational to their understandings of life and the Church. I didn't actually have to do anything confrontational, just showing up on Sunday morning to preach did it'.<sup>42</sup>

According to Timothy Willem Jones, such experiences relate to traditional notions of witnessing women in sacred spaces, noting that sacred spaces in churches are marked by the 'ordering of the objects and persons', and those spaces have been historically ordered by gender. This can be witnessed in the protests that occurred when women began joining the choirs of the Church of England in the 1880s, which the likes of the renowned theologian Henry Liddon described as 'grotesque'. The taboo against women in sacred spaces determined that women were not permitted to preach or serve, or even take the collection into the sanctuary. Women were deemed too impure, as 'sexual difference in the ordering of ecclesiastical ritual and space' had become ingrained and normalised into Christian ecclesiology.<sup>43</sup> What we see here is boundary maintenance in the politics of religious belonging, where dominant hegemonies used sexuality and purity in order to shame the bodies of women. Proponents for the ordination of women noted the irrational nature of such purity taboos. This was supported by Professor Grensted, the Nolloth Professor of Philosophy of the Christian Religion in the University of Oxford, on his giving evidence to the 1935 Archbishop's Commission, where he wrote that 'the admission of women to Holy Orders, and especially to the ministry of the sanctuary, is so commonly regarded as something shameful. This sense of shame cannot be regarded under any other light than as a non-rational sex-taboo'.<sup>44</sup> He maintained that arguments against the ordination of women into the Priesthood were shaped solely by emotion and tradition, as opposed to rational or theological thought, and that concepts of purity in relation to menstruation were used in order to maintain the status quo, and shame the bodies of women. Despite such arguments, it was maintained by the authorities of the Church, inclusive of Athelston Riley, secretary to the English Church Union, that female clergy would be 'simultaneously rejecting orthodox Marian models of female piety and desecrating sacred space in the church'.<sup>45</sup> In response, many feminist theologians have sought to create a politics and lived theology of religious belonging for women in the church.

The process of engendering education offers the opportunity to explore the theological arguments and diversity of opinions over the role of women in sacred spaces as such beliefs and stances continue to impact the embodied religious and priestly belonging for

41. Blue E (2012) Should theological education be different for clergywomen?

42. Blue E (2012) Should theological education be different for clergywomen?

43. Jones TW (2012) Unduly conscious of her sex: priesthood, female bodies, and sacred space in the Church of England. *Women's History Review* 21(4): 639–655, 640.

44. See Woolf V (1938) *A Room of One's Own and Three Guineas*. London: Penguin, 254.

45. Jones TW (2012) Unduly conscious of her sex, 639–655, 651.

women ministers. By their very presence, women in the ‘sanctuary and chancel have challenged the gendered ordering of sacred space and of the social and theological relationships performed in that space’.<sup>46</sup> In agreement with the South African womanist theologian Beverley Haddad, ‘the role that gender plays in the transformation process should not be an afterthought to transformation, but lies at the heart of the process’.<sup>47</sup> Engendering theological education involves ensuring that ‘all voices are heard – particularly the whispering and silent voices’.<sup>48</sup> One of the ways in which the classroom can enable engendered transformative pedagogy on the subject of women in sacred spaces is through critical readings of Scripture, as the bodies of women are theological and political categories, and it is the unnamed women of Scripture that often narrate the most radical narratives of faith.

## Bleeding Women in Sacred Spaces

Take, for example, the story of the haemorrhaging woman in the Gospel of Luke who through a feminist re-reading is an example of a bleeding woman in a sacred space, navigating a patriarchal religious world, and claiming identity-specific power through faith in Christ. The story narrates how as Jesus was making his way through the crowds, a woman who had been subject to bleeding for 12 years, and who doctors had failed to heal, came behind Christ and touched the edge of his cloak, and immediately her bleeding stopped (Luke 8: 42–48). Jesus then searches for the person who has touched him and taken power from him. And the woman ‘seeing she could not go unnoticed’ comes out in trepidation; among the crowds of people, she announces it was she who touched him, and that she had been instantly healed. Christ announced that it was her faith that healed her.

The woman’s body becomes symbolic within the text as a site of struggle and shame; she remains silent, she bleeds, she breaks down social barriers of purity by touching the cloak of the man they call the son of God. Such bodily actions in women’s religious lives cannot be emphasised enough. It is the agency of the woman who claims authority in her declaration that it is she who has touched the cloak of Christ. Displaying ultimate faith, she claims power – a ritual power of healing. She, like the women of the Church today, has negotiated her faith in the midst of her life. And what she displays is ultimately her relationship with Christ, a relationship shaped by ‘vulnerability, justice, truth and love’, a relationship that is both personal and political.<sup>49</sup> These actions are particularly important when we consider the bleeding woman as a woman who has existed on the boundaries of her faith community, as someone deemed impure for both her gender and bodily bleeding – and therefore shamed into a feeling of socio-religious unbelonging. And yet she transgresses the fixed boundaries by touching the cloak of Christ, who feels his own

46. Jones TW (2012) Unduly conscious of her sex, 639–655, 640, 640.

47. Haddad B (2003) Engendering theological education for transformation. *Journal of Theology for Southern Africa* 116: 65–80.

48. See Botha NA (2003) Towards the en-gendering of missiology: the life-narrative of Mina Tembeka Soga. *Missionalia* 31(1): 105–116.

49. Isasi-Diaz AM and Tarango Y (1988) *Hispanic Women*.

power taken from him. The Church is often guilty of shaming those who transgress the boundaries of religious belonging, who challenge the status quo. And yet in the gospels it is often those who have been marginalised by the religious elites and in their shamed bodies enter sacred spaces to touch the body of Christ, that are rewarded for their faithful resistance, whether it be the sex worker at Christ's feet, or widows who throw back their coins or the bleeding women who enter sacred spaces to touch the cloak of Christ; they are the ones who Christ recognises for their faith, they are the ones who transgress fixed notions of belonging, and are representatives on earth of the shamed and broken body of Christ.

Paul Avis comments that this text outlines how 'Jesus intentionally and overtly abolished the Old Testament purity regulations . . . which impinged drastically on the sphere of women and the erotic . . .'.<sup>50</sup> While this is the case, it is also worth recognising that it was the unnamed woman in the text who is also prophetic; it is she who breaks the boundaries, reaches out and is received and her glorious body celebrated. Sometimes it takes a bleeding woman to enter a sacred space, and in faithful resistance reach out and touch the cloak of Christ. In trepidation, bravery and faith, she knew her place – a bleeding prophet in a crowd, a body of resistance, a symbol of hope and change. This woman had to navigate her faith in a system dominated by patriarchy and purity; women ordinands today navigate religious spaces, but the spaces that they navigate have been defined for them by a system that for over 2000 years did not permit women to have a voice. And this is especially important when we consider selfhood in the discernment and formation process to the priesthood, as for too long, Western theologising has treated theological education as though it were an 'objective science' whose authority stems from the West and is shaped solely by male elites, when our theologising and our contemplations on God are born out of particular perspectives and shaped by the day-to-day needs and struggles of those engaged.<sup>51</sup> As women discern their calling, it involves contemplating 'their deep sense of an existential interconnection between themselves and the divine'.<sup>52</sup> We therefore need to be asking the question of whether the formation process in theological education has truly accepted the ordination of women – are their narratives and life experiences being taken into consideration in the pedagogies of theological formation? Because, as Anna Mercedes notes, 'there are too many examples of lives shattered by the teaching of the churches in combination with unjust situations. Christian rhetoric can be dangerous, and has been particularly for subjugated persons'.<sup>53</sup> Ordinands carry their own stories, their own personal narratives of life, and very rarely are those who train them fully aware of all the details. Yet the stories are so vital because they involve the selfhood of the individual and 'selfhood is engendered'.<sup>54</sup>

50. Avis P (1989) *Eros and the Sacred*. London: SPCK, 106.

51. Isasi-Diaz AM and Tarango Y (1988) *Hispanic Women*.

52. Isasi-Diaz AM and Tarango Y (1988) *Hispanic Women*, 65.

53. Mercedes A (2011) *Power for: Feminism and Christ's Self Giving*. London: T&T Clark, 1.

54. Keller C (1990) Scoop up the water and the moon is in your hands: on feminist theology and dynamic self-emptying. In: Cobb JB and Ives C (eds) *The Emptying God*. Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 102–115, 106.

## Conclusion

The consciousness of women ordinands and all other marginalised peoples must be liberated from dogmas that have throughout history degraded them. As Lavinia Byrne notes,

I believe that the problem for women is that the Christian tradition has been less open to human differences than the Gospels are; the tradition has thought it necessary to set up half of the human family at the expense of the other . . . one consequence is that, as women, we have been forced to define our identity in ways that lead us to deny that identity.<sup>55</sup>

Christian theology and tradition has the potential to exacerbate violence against women, and the psychological dimension of exclusion and feelings of non-belonging cannot be overlooked. It is for this reason that we must be free to explore the liberative narratives of our Scriptures, to witness where women have navigated their identities in Christ in cultures that have not necessarily been on the side of women. The issue here is that Christian theologising has a history that spans over 2000 years and missing from its chapters are the voices of women. So, the question must be asked – are we seeking greater participation in a patriarchal structure, and if so – how do women find space within a system, that is, a theological education system, that was not created for us? Or, are we seeking liberation from within – so that we may theologise from our particular social locations, from our own bodies, bodies that Christian theologies have for centuries determined unworthy and ‘refused to attribute the fullness of the *imago dei* . . . noting that not only could women not represent God to the Christian community, they could not represent the generically human – before God or before the community’.<sup>56</sup> In doing so we may come to ‘know our place’ as one of struggle – but a struggle that will help shape a formation process to priesthood that enables true flourishing.

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55. Byrne L, *Women before God*. London: SPCK, 1988, 7.

56. See Farley M (1976) Moral imperatives for the ordination of women. In: Gardiner AM (ed.) *Women and Catholic Priesthood: An Expanded Vision*. New York: Paulist Press, 40–41.